

# Voter Turnout Rates from a Comparative Perspective

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This section provides a brief overview of worldwide voter turnout statistics since 1945 for both parliamentary and presidential elections. It is based on the International IDEA database of elections, which covers 170 independent states and includes data for 1,256 parliamentary elections and 412 presidential elections. It examines trends over time since 1945, such as differences in turnout between geographical regions and between different types of electoral systems. Finally, the survey provides some comparison between voter turnout and selected political, institutional and socio-economic factors that are often cited as determinants of differing voter turnout rates. All figures refer to parliamentary elections unless otherwise indicated.

### **OPERATIONALIZING VOTER TURNOUT**

Voter turnout is one measure of citizen participation in politics. It is usually expressed as the percentage of voters who cast a vote (i.e., “turnout”) at an election. This total number of voters includes those who cast blank or invalid votes, as they still participate.

## Voter Turnout Rates from a Comparative Perspective

The pool of eligible voters can be defined in different ways. International IDEA uses two measures: the number of registered voters and estimated voting age population (VAP). Information on the number of registered voters has been compiled from electoral management bodies around the world and an estimate on voting age population has been made using population statistics from the United Nations. Further information on the methodology can be found on page 9.

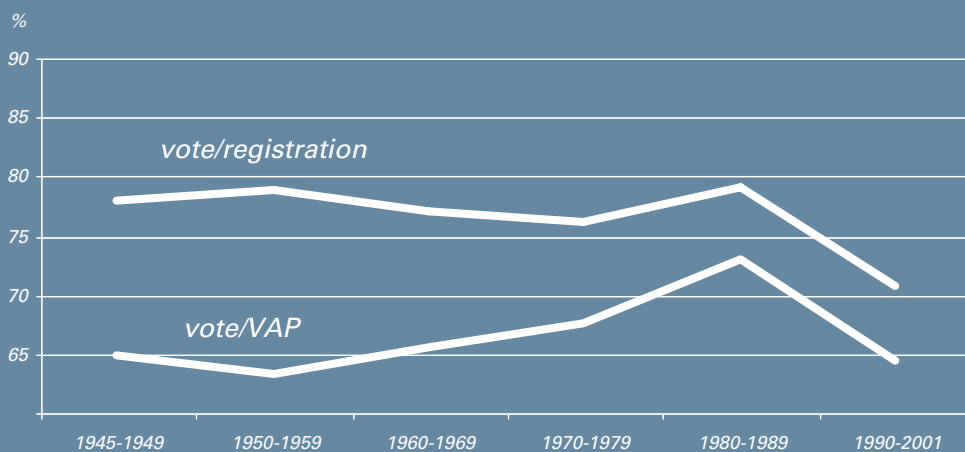
There are advantages and disadvantages in using either of these calculations as the basis for turnout statistics. Registration is useful in that in many countries it is a prerequisite for voting, so the number of registered voters reflects those who may actually be able to cast a vote. However, in some

countries registration may not be used or the register itself may be inaccurate.

The use of voting age population allows for an estimate of the potential number of voters, were all systemic and administrative barriers to be removed. However, as an estimate, it is not able to exclude those within a population who may not be eligible for registration or voting due to factors such as non-citizenship, mental competence or imprisonment.

The material presented here is a summary both of the tables later in this book and of the data collected for the International IDEA Voter Turnout Database. More information on the database can be found in this report's appendix and at International IDEA's website at [www.idea.int/turnout](http://www.idea.int/turnout).

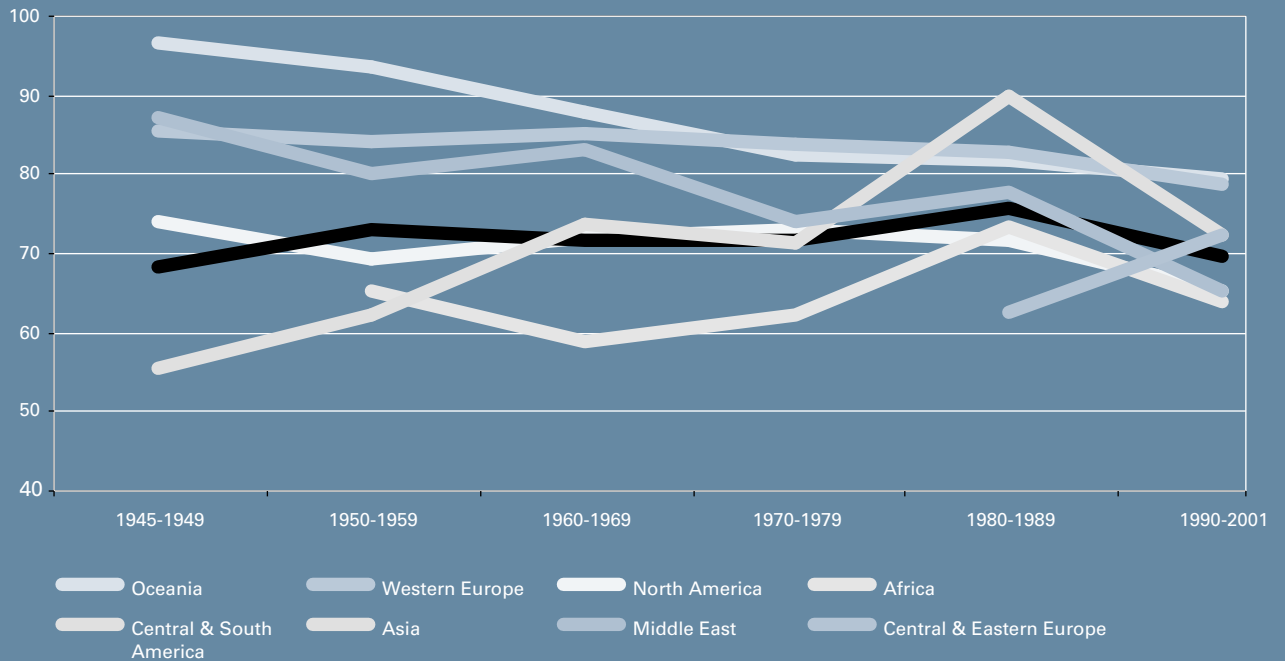
**Figure 9: Worldwide turnout, 1945-2001**



Key: VAP=voting age population.

**Figure 10: Turnout by region over time**

Vote to registration ratio by region over time, parliamentary elections, 1945-2001



Source: International IDEA.

Figure 9: *Worldwide turnout, 1945-2001* shows a notable decline in voter turnout since the mid-1980s. This decline is similar whether turnout is measured as a percentage of registration or as a percentage of the voting age population. However, this global trend is not consistently reflected across regions.

**Figure 10: Turnout by region over time**

Africa experienced a pronounced increase in turnout, riding the wave of democratization to the mid-1980s. After ten years of elections, Central and East European countries are still increasing voter turnout. Turnout in North and South American countries has

remained stable across the time period, as has that of Oceania and Western Europe. The Middle East has a varied turnout record, but Asia has seen the most pronounced variations.

Average turnout from 1990 to 2001 peaked at 79 percent in Oceania, just ahead of Western Europe with 78 percent. Both Asia and the Central and Eastern European region had average voter turnout of 72 percent. The average in Central and South America was 69 percent; the average in North America and the Caribbean was 65 percent, the same as in the Middle East. Africa's average turnout was the lowest at 64 percent.

## Voter Turnout Rates from a Comparative Perspective

**Figure 11: League table by country vote to registration ratio, parliamentary elections, 1945-2001**

Country (no. of elections)	vote/reg %		
1 Australia(22)	94.5	42 Bulgaria(4)	81.4
2 Singapore(8)	93.5	43 Andorra(3)	81.4
3 Uzbekistan(3)	93.5	44 Turkey(10)	81.3
4 Liechtenstein(17)	92.8	45 Fiji(3)	81.0
5 Belgium(18)	92.5	46 Philippines(7)	80.9
6 Nauru(5)	92.4	47 Belize(5)	80.4
7 Bahamas(6)	91.9	48 Norway(15)	80.4
8 Indonesia(7)	91.5	49 Peru(9)	80.3
9 Burundi(1)	91.4	50 Israel(15)	80.3
10 Austria(17)	91.3	51 Venezuela(10)	80.0
11 Angola(1)	91.2	52 Uruguay(11)	80.0
12 Mongolia(4)	91.1	53 Greece(16)	79.9
13 New Zealand(19)	90.8	54 Kuwait(5)	79.6
14 Cambodia(2)	90.3	55 Chile(11)	78.9
15 Italy(15)	89.8	56 Latvia(4)	78.7
16 Luxembourg(12)	89.7	57 Namibia(3)	78.6
17 Cyprus(7)	89.7	58 Aruba(3)	78.5
18 Iceland(17)	89.5	59 Bahrain(1)	78.4
19 South Africa(1)	89.3	60 San Marino(7)	78.4
20 Cook Islands(1)	89.0	61 Paraguay(9)	78.3
21 Tajikistan(2)	88.7	62 Mozambique(2)	78.0
22 Guyana(7)	88.5	63 Kiribati(4)	77.9
23 Thailand(15)	88.3	64 Brazil(14)	77.8
24 Malta(14)	88.2	65 Costa Rica(12)	77.7
25 Albania(4)	88.0	66 Iran(1)	77.3
26 Netherlands(16)	87.5	67 Azerbaijan(2)	77.0
27 Sweden(17)	87.1	68 Portugal(10)	77.0
28 Seychelles(2)	86.6	69 Slovenia(3)	76.6
39 Tunisia(5)	86.2	70 Kazakhstan(1)	76.2
30 Malawi(2)	86.2	71 Finland(16)	76.0
31 East Timor(1)	86.0	72 Nicaragua(6)	75.9
32 Denmark(22)	85.9	73 Panama(4)	75.5
33 Germany(14)	85.4	74 Armenia(2)	75.4
34 Slovakia(4)	85.2	75 Palestinian Authority(1)	75.4
35 Mauritius(6)	84.4	76 United Kingdom(16)	75.2
36 Argentina(18)	84.2	77 Tanzania(2)	74.6
37 Czech Republic(4)	82.8	78 Dominica(12)	74.4
38 Western Samoa(3)	82.3	79 Sri Lanka(11)	74.3
39 Bolivia(11)	82.2	80 St. Kitts & Nevis(11)	74.2
40 Tuvalu(2)	81.9	81 Suriname(6)	74.2
41 Palau(6)	81.7	82 Cameroon(4)	74.0
		83 Canada(18)	73.9
		84 France(15)	73.8
		85 Spain(8)	73.6
		86 Gambia(5)	73.4
		87 Ireland(16)	73.3
		88 Ukraine(2)	73.2

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89 Republic of Korea(10)	72.9	136 Syria(1)	61.2
90 Honduras(11)	72.8	137 Botswana(6)	60.7
91 Moldova(3)	72.8	138 Belarus(2)	60.6
92 Romania(3)	72.5	139 Sierra Leone(1)	60.3
93 Madagascar(5)	72.5	140 Bosnia & Herzegovina(3)	60.2
94 St. Vincent & the Grenadines(14)	72.2	141 India(13)	59.4
95 Lesotho(4)	72.1	142 Russia(3)	58.4
96 Maldives(2)	72.0	143 Bangladesh(6)	58.2
97 Togo(2)	71.9	144 Sudan(2)	57.6
98 Malaysia(6)	71.5	145 Switzerland(14)	56.5
99 Morocco(5)	71.2	146 Tonga(4)	56.3
100 Croatia(3)	71.2	147 Niger(3)	56.2
101 Democratic Rep. of Congo(1)	70.9	148 Macedonia(2)	54.1
102 Monaco(7)	70.9	149 Senegal(6)	53.8
103 Uganda(3)	70.8	150 Lithuania(3)	52.7
104 Yemen(2)	70.7	151 Djibouti(2)	52.6
105 Taiwan (Republic of China)(5)	70.5	152 Jordan(3)	51.8
106 Comoros Islands(2)	70.3	153 Zambia(3)	51.7
107 Grenada(6)	70.3	154 Guatemala(16)	51.6
108 Anguilla(8)	69.5	155 Ghana(6)	50.5
109 Japan(22)	69.5	156 Poland(5)	50.3
110 Nepal(7)	69.1	157 Nigeria(3)	50.3
111 Ecuador(12)	68.9	158 Chad(1)	50.1
112 Georgia(3)	68.9	159 El Salvador(11)	49.6
113 Barbados(11)	68.8	160 Zimbabwe(3)	48.7
114 Cap Verde(3)	68.6	161 Colombia(18)	47.6
115 Vanuatu(5)	68.3	162 Haiti(3)	47.1
116 Estonia(4)	68.1	163 Mauritania(2)	45.5
117 Jamaica(12)	68.1	164 Pakistan(6)	45.3
118 Hungary(3)	67.0	165 Egypt(5)	45.1
119 Dominican Republic(6)	66.6	166 Burkina Faso(4)	41.7
120 United States of America(17)	66.5	167 Lebanon(3)	39.5
121 Benin(3)	65.9	168 Ivory Coast(2)	37.0
122 Mexico(19)	65.2	169 Mali(2)	21.3
123 Sao Tome e Principe(3)	64.5		
124 Papua New Guinea(8)	64.1		
125 St. Lucia(12)	64.1		
126 Solomon Islands(4)	63.8		
127 Trinidad & Tobago(12)	63.3		
128 Central African Republic(2)	63.2		
129 Burma(2)	62.7		
130 Kyrgyzstan(3)	62.5		
131 Guinea Bissau(2)	62.5		
132 Algeria(2)	62.3		
133 Antigua & Barbuda(11)	62.2		
134 Kenya(2)	62.1		
135 Guinea(1)	61.9		

**Key:** no.=number of elections.

\* Argentina included women in the franchise from 1947.

\* Bahrain only includes men in the franchise.

\* Belgium included women in the franchise from 1948.

\* Czech Republic includes elections in Czechoslovakia 1990 and 1992.

\* Greece included women in the franchise from 1986.

\* Kuwait only includes men in the franchise.

\* Liechtenstein included women in the franchise from 1986.

\* Switzerland included women in the franchise from 1971.

## Voter Turnout Rates from a Comparative Perspective

### COMPARING TURNOUT ACROSS NATIONS

Figure 11, p.78 shows the turnout ranking for all countries in the International IDEA database. The high ranking of certain countries may be a surprise; it certainly refutes the notion that only Western countries have high voter turnout.

This table is based on voter turnout as a percentage of registered voters, which may explain some apparent anomalies. Turnout may be high if a voters' register is not of high quality or is outdated. Five of the top seven countries - Australia, Nauru, Singapore, Belgium, and Liechtenstein - enforce compulsory voting laws, which may explain their high turnout.

**Figure 12: League table by region, vote to registration ratio.**

Ranking of average turnout since 1945  
Country (no. of elections) vote/reg %

#### **Oceania**

Australia(22)	94.5
Nauru(5)	92.4
New Zealand(19)	90.8
Cook Islands(1)	89.0
Western Samoa(3)	82.3
Tuvalu(2)	81.9
Palau(6)	81.7
Fiji(3)	81.0
Kiribati(4)	77.9
Vanuatu(5)	68.3
Papua New Guinea(8)	64.1
Solomon Islands(4)	63.8
Tonga(4)	56.3
Average(86)	83.1

#### **Western Europe**

Liechtenstein(17)	92.8
Belgium(18)	92.5
Austria(17)	91.3
Italy(15)	89.8
Luxembourg(12)	89.7
Cyprus(7)	89.7
Iceland(17)	89.5
Malta(14)	88.2
Netherlands(16)	87.5
Sweden(17)	87.1

Denmark(22)	85.9
Germany(14)	85.4
Andorra(3)	81.4
Turkey(10)	81.3
Norway(15)	80.4
Greece(16)	79.9
San Marino(7)	78.4
Portugal(10)	77.0
Finland(16)	76.0
United Kingdom(16)	75.2
France(15)	73.8
Spain(8)	73.6
Ireland(16)	73.3
Monaco(7)	70.9
Switzerland(14)	56.5
Average(339)	82.6

#### **North America**

Bahamas(6)	91.9
Aruba(3)	78.5
Dominica(12)	74.4
St. Kitts & Nevis(11)	74.2
Canada(18)	73.9
St. Vincent & the Grenadines(14)	72.2
Grenada(6)	70.3
Anguilla(8)	69.5
Barbados(11)	68.8
Jamaica(12)	68.1
Dominican Republic(6)	66.6
United States of America(17)	66.5
St. Lucia(12)	64.1
Trinidad & Tobago(12)	63.3
Antigua & Barbuda(11)	62.2
Haiti(3)	47.1
Average(162)	69.6

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### **Africa**

<i>Burundi(1)</i>	91.4
<i>Angola(1)</i>	91.2
<i>South Africa(1)</i>	89.3
<i>Seychelles(2)</i>	86.6
<i>Tunisia(5)</i>	86.2
<i>Malawi(2)</i>	86.2
<i>Mauritius(6)</i>	84.4
<i>Namibia(3)</i>	78.6
<i>Mozambique(2)</i>	78.0
<i>Tanzania(2)</i>	74.6
<i>Cameroon(4)</i>	74.0
<i>Gambia(5)</i>	73.4
<i>Madagascar(5)</i>	72.5
<i>Lesotho(4)</i>	72.1
<i>Togo(2)</i>	71.9
<i>Morocco(5)</i>	71.2
<i>Democratic Republic of Congo(1)</i>	70.9
<i>Uganda(3)</i>	70.8
<i>Comoros Islands(2)</i>	70.3
<i>Cap Verde(3)</i>	68.6
<i>Benin(3)</i>	65.9
<i>Sao Tome e Principe(3)</i>	64.5
<i>Central African Republic(2)</i>	63.2
<i>Guinea Bissau(2)</i>	62.5
<i>Algeria(2)</i>	62.3
<i>Kenya(2)</i>	62.1
<i>Guinea(1)</i>	61.9
<i>Botswana(6)</i>	60.7
<i>Sierra Leone(1)</i>	60.3
<i>Sudan(2)</i>	57.6
<i>Niger(3)</i>	56.2
<i>Senegal(6)</i>	53.8
<i>Djibouti(2)</i>	52.6
<i>Zambia(3)</i>	51.7
<i>Ghana(6)</i>	50.5
<i>Nigeria(3)</i>	50.3
<i>Chad(1)</i>	50.1
<i>Zimbabwe(3)</i>	48.7
<i>Mauritania(2)</i>	45.5
<i>Egypt(5)</i>	45.1
<i>Burkina Faso(4)</i>	41.7
<i>Ivory Coast(2)</i>	37.0
<i>Mali(2)</i>	21.3
<i>Average(126)</i>	64.5

### **Central & South America**

<i>Guyana(7)</i>	88.5
<i>Argentina(18)</i>	84.2
<i>Bolivia(11)</i>	82.2
<i>Belize(5)</i>	80.4
<i>Peru(9)</i>	80.3
<i>Venezuela(10)</i>	80.0
<i>Uruguay(11)</i>	80.0
<i>Chile(11)</i>	78.9
<i>Paraguay(9)</i>	78.3
<i>Brazil(14)</i>	77.8
<i>Costa Rica(12)</i>	77.7
<i>Nicaragua(6)</i>	75.9
<i>Panama(4)</i>	75.5
<i>Suriname(6)</i>	74.2
<i>Honduras(11)</i>	72.8
<i>Ecuador(12)</i>	68.9
<i>Mexico(19)</i>	65.2
<i>Guatemala(16)</i>	51.6
<i>El Salvador(11)</i>	49.6
<i>Colombia(18)</i>	47.6
<i>Average(220)</i>	71.5

### **Asia**

<i>Singapore(8)</i>	93.5
<i>Indonesia(7)</i>	91.5
<i>Mongolia(4)</i>	91.1
<i>Cambodia(2)</i>	90.3
<i>Thailand(15)</i>	88.3
<i>East Timor(1)</i>	86.0
<i>Philippines(7)</i>	80.9
<i>Sri Lanka(11)</i>	74.3
<i>Republic of Korea(10)</i>	72.9
<i>Maldives(2)</i>	72.0
<i>Malaysia(6)</i>	71.5
<i>Taiwan (Republic of China)(5)</i>	70.5
<i>Japan(22)</i>	69.5
<i>Nepal(7)</i>	69.1
<i>Burma(2)</i>	62.7
<i>India(13)</i>	59.4
<i>Bangladesh(6)</i>	58.2
<i>Pakistan(6)</i>	45.3
<i>Average(134)</i>	74.0

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(...Figure 12)

### **Middle East**

Israel(15)	80.3
Kuwait(5)	79.6
Bahrain(1)	78.4
Iran(1)	77.3
Palestinian Authority(1)	75.4
Yemen(2)	70.7
Syria(1)	61.2
Jordan(3)	51.8
Lebanon(3)	39.5
Average(32)	72.2

### **Central & Eastern Europe**

Uzbekistan(3)	93.5
Tajikistan(2)	88.7
Albania(4)	88.0
Slovakia(4)	85.2
Czech Republic(4)	82.8
Bulgaria(4)	81.4
Latvia(4)	78.7
Azerbaijan(2)	77.0
Slovenia(3)	76.6
Kazakhstan(1)	76.2
Armenia(2)	75.4
Ukraine(2)	73.2
Moldova(3)	72.8
Romania(3)	72.5
Croatia(3)	71.2
Georgia(3)	68.9
Estonia(4)	68.1
Hungary(3)	67.0
Kyrgyzstan(3)	62.5
Belarus(2)	60.6
Bosnia & Herzegovina(3)	60.2
Russia(3)	58.4
Macedonia(2)	54.1
Lithuania(3)	52.7
Poland(5)	50.3
Average(75)	71.9

**Key:** no.=number of elections.

If this data is presented regionally, the differences within each region can be seen more clearly. The difference between the highest and lowest average turnout in Western Europe - Liechtenstein's 93 percent and neighbouring Switzerland's 56 percent - may be explained by the use of compulsory voting in Liechtenstein. On the other hand the Bahamas enjoys a non-compulsory average of 92 percent, compared to the Haitian average of 47 percent. ( Figure 12)

### **Turnout by population**

If we rank countries according to turnout as a percentage of voting age population, the results are quite different. Our estimate of voting age population is based on an estimate of the adult population, and does not account for legal or systemic barriers to registration.

None of the top ten countries from Figure 11 are among the top ten when we express turnout as a percentage of voting age population; however five countries maintain their top twenty ranking (Uzbekistan, New Zealand, Belgium, Austria and Australia).

Countries from diverse regions are among the top ten: three from Africa, three from Western Europe, two from Asia, one from Central and Eastern Europe, and one from Latin America.



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Figure 13: League table by country, vote to voting age population ratio.

Parliamentary elections, 1945-2001

Country (no. of elections)	vote/vap %
1 Suriname(8)	93.8
2 Comoros Islands(2)	93.6
3 Seychelles(2)	93.1
4 Albania(5)	92.4
5 Italy(15)	92.0
6 Cambodia(2)	90.5
7 Iceland(17)	89.3
8 Angola(1)	88.3
9 Portugal(10)	88.2
10 Indonesia(7)	87.9
11 Uzbekistan(3)	87.7
12 Cook Islands(1)	87.3
13 Somalia(1)	87.1
14 Malawi(2)	86.9
15 Western Samoa(3)	86.4
16 Guyana(8)	86.0
17 New Zealand(19)	86.0
18 Belgium(18)	84.8
19 Austria(17)	84.4
20 Australia(22)	84.2
21 Sweden(17)	84.1
22 Netherlands(16)	83.8
23 Denmark(22)	83.6
24 Slovakia(4)	82.9
25 Czech Republic(4)	82.8
26 Canada(18)	82.6
27 San Marino(7)	82.5
28 Mauritius(7)	82.4
29 Thailand(14)	82.1
30 Palau(1)	81.7
31 Greece(18)	80.8
32 Aruba(3)	80.4
33 Israel(15)	80.3
34 Germany(14)	80.2
35 Mongolia(4)	79.5
36 Norway(15)	79.2
37 Tajikistan(2)	79.0
38 Malta(14)	78.9
39 Finland(16)	78.1
40 Slovenia(3)	77.9
41 Croatia(3)	77.2
42 Spain(8)	76.4
43 Bulgaria(4)	76.1
44 Uruguay(11)	76.1
45 Maldives(2)	76.0
46 Namibia(3)	75.7
47 Burundi(1)	75.4
48 Palestinian Authority(1)	75.4
49 Ireland(16)	74.9
50 South Africa(2)	74.7
51 Turkey(10)	74.2
52 St. Vincent & the Grenadines(14)	74.1
53 United Kingdom(16)	73.8
54 Republic of Korea(10)	72.9
55 Dominica(12)	72.9
56 Cap Verde(3)	72.4
57 Papua New Guinea(8)	72.2
58 Romania(3)	72.2
59 Azerbaijan(2)	71.9
60 Cyprus(7)	71.4
61 Ukraine(2)	70.8
62 Taiwan (Republic of China)(4)	70.1
63 Togo(4)	69.3
64 Argentina(18)	69.3
65 Japan(22)	68.7
66 Costa Rica(13)	68.1
67 Hungary(3)	68.1
68 Dominican Republic(11)	67.8
69 Lebanon(3)	67.8
70 Iran(2)	67.6
71 France(15)	67.3
72 Belize(5)	67.2
73 Venezuela(11)	67.2
74 Algeria(2)	67.1
75 Nepal(7)	67.0
76 Trinidad & Tobago(12)	66.5
77 Madagascar(5)	66.1
78 Grenada(12)	66.1
79 Vanuatu(5)	65.7
80 Fiji(3)	64.9
81 Lesotho(4)	64.3
82 Barbados(11)	63.9
83 Georgia(3)	63.7
84 Liechtenstein(17)	63.6
85 Luxembourg(13)	63.5
86 Bahamas(6)	63.4
87 St. Lucia(13)	62.5
88 Sri Lanka(11)	62.4
89 Kiribati(5)	62.4
90 Mozambique(2)	62.3
91 Benin(3)	62.0

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92 Nicaragua(10)	62.0	140 Sierra Leone(3)	46.8
93 Moldova(3)	61.6	141 Tanzania(2)	46.8
94 India(13)	61.5	142 Botswana(7)	46.2
95 Bolivia(13)	61.4	143 Micronesia(2)	46.2
96 Philippines(7)	60.6	144 Ghana(6)	46.1
97 St. Kitts & Nevis(11)	60.6	145 Chile(11)	45.9
98 Latvia(4)	60.3	146 Mauritania(2)	45.1
99 Guinea(1)	59.9	147 El Salvador(16)	43.9
100 Andorra(3)	59.5	148 Kenya(2)	43.8
101 Solomon Islands(5)	59.0	149 Ecuador(15)	42.6
102 Belarus(2)	58.9	150 Senegal(7)	42.3
103 Jamaica(12)	58.6	151 Zambia(3)	41.4
104 Bosnia & Herzegovina(3)	58.3	152 Pakistan(6)	40.7
105 Syria(1)	58.0	153 Democratic Rep. of Congo(2)	39.0
106 Panama(5)	58.0	154 Nauru(8)	38.8
107 Tunisia(5)	57.9	155 Burkina Faso(4)	38.4
108 Malaysia(8)	57.8	156 Yemen(2)	36.8
109 Anguilla(2)	57.7	157 Colombia(20)	36.2
110 Morocco(5)	57.6	158 Bahrain(1)	32.6
111 Lithuania(3)	56.9	159 Sudan(2)	32.0
112 Russia(3)	56.6	160 Ivory Coast(2)	31.9
113 Sao Tome e Principe(3)	56.6	161 Jordan(3)	29.9
114 Paraguay(11)	56.0	162 Guatemala(16)	29.8
115 Niger(3)	56.0	163 Djibouti(2)	28.1
116 Bangladesh(6)	56.0	164 Chad(1)	25.6
117 Gambia(6)	55.8	165 Egypt(5)	24.6
118 Zimbabwe(6)	55.7	166 Kazakhstan(1)	22.7
119 Honduras(12)	55.3	167 Mali(2)	21.7
120 Peru(9)	54.8	168 Kuwait(5)	14.0
121 Kyrgyzstan(3)	54.3	169 Monaco(7)	13.2
122 Cameroon(4)	53.9		
123 Estonia(4)	53.5		
124 Guinea Bissau(2)	52.6		
125 Tonga(3)	52.4		
126 Central African Republic(2)	51.9		
127 Switzerland(14)	51.9		
128 Poland(5)	51.4		
129 Singapore(8)	51.2		
130 Uganda(3)	50.6		
131 Burma(2)	50.0		
132 Antigua & Barbuda(11)	49.6		
133 Haiti(3)	48.8		
134 Macedonia(2)	48.4		
135 Brazil(14)	48.2		
136 Mexico(19)	48.1		
137 Armenia(2)	48.0		
138 United States of America(28)	47.7		
139 Nigeria(3)	47.6		

**Key:** VAP= voting age population; no.=number of elections.

\* Argentina included women in the franchise from 1947.

\* Bahrain only includes men in the franchise.

\* Belgium included women in the franchise from 1948.

\* Czech Republic includes elections in Czechoslovakia 1990 and 1992.

\* Greece included women in the franchise from 1986.

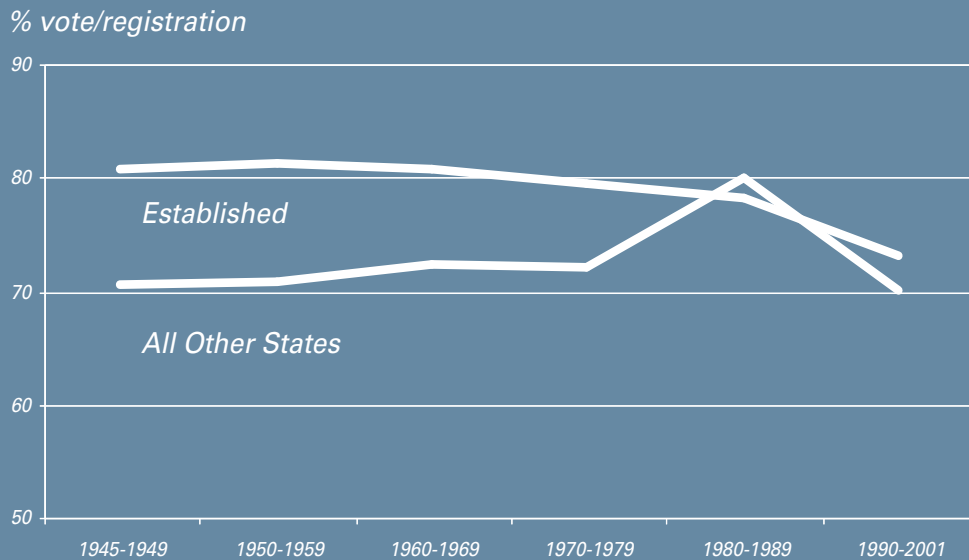
\* Kuwait only includes men in the franchise.

\* Liechtenstein included women in the franchise from 1986.

\* Switzerland included women in the franchise from 1971.

**Figure 14: Differences between established democracies and other states over time**

*Vote to registration ratio for established democracies and other states since 1945*



Source: International IDEA.

## VOTER TURNOUT AND SOCIO-ECONOMIC FACTORS

Figure 14: *Differences between established democracies and other states over time*

Our data reveals that high-turnout countries are neither exclusively new nor established democracies. Arend Lijphart has defined thirty six countries\* as “established democracies” if they are democratic now and have been for twenty years (democracy assessed using a Freedom House scale, as below). These established democracies have seen a slow but steady decline in turnout since the 1970s. During the 1970s, however, as a result of the democratization movement,

“other states” experienced an increase in voter turnout, peaking at about 80 percent. The current turnout in “other states” is about 70 percent, lower than the 73 percent in established democracies.

Our data shows however that a high level of political freedoms and civil liberties may contribute to a high level of voter turnout.

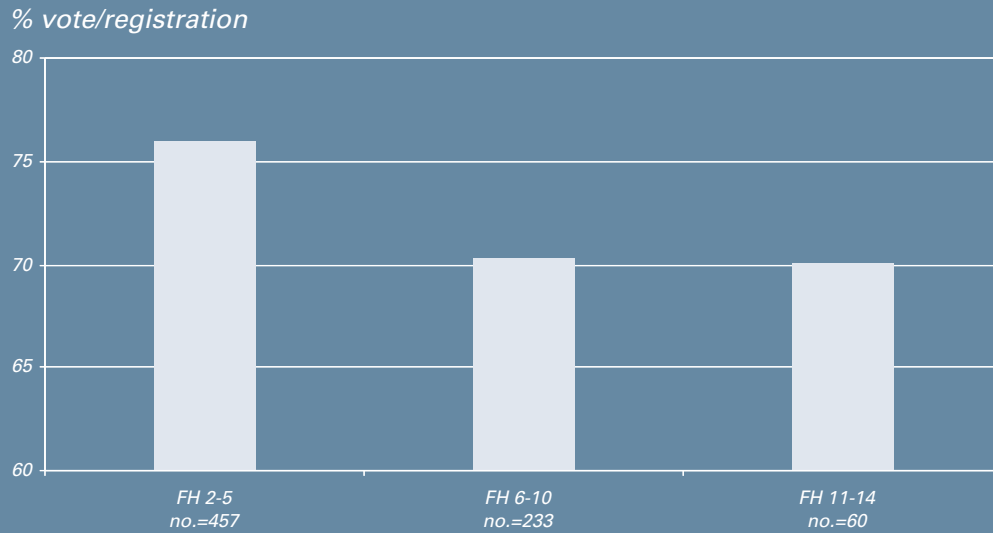
The 457 elections conducted in a political system rated by Freedom House as being “free” yielded an average turnout of 76 percent. However, being in either a “partly free” or a “not free” environment seems less of an influence on turnout, as both ratings see an average turnout of 70 percent.

\*Australia, Austria, Bahamas, Barbados, Belgium, Botswana, Canada, Colombia, Costa Rica, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Iceland, India, Ireland, Israel, Italy, Jamaica, Japan, Luxembourg, Malta, Mauritius, Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Papua New Guinea, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Trinidad and Tobago, United Kingdom, United States of America, Venezuela.

Source: Lijphart, A. 1999. *Patterns of Democracy, Government Forms and Performance in Thirty-Six Countries*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

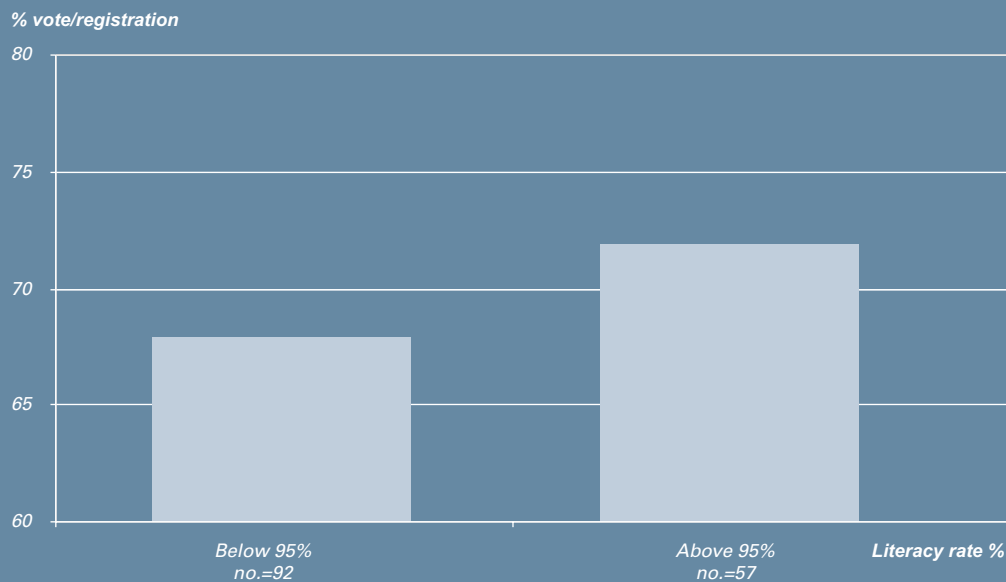
# Voter Turnout Rates from a Comparative Perspective

**Figure 15: Freedom House rating and voter turnout**  
Vote to registration ratio by Freedom House rating, 1945-2000



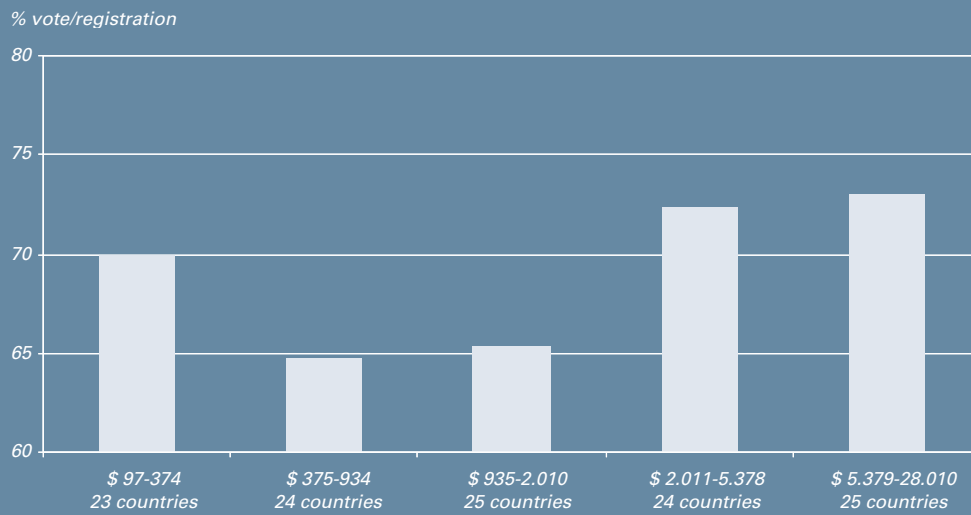
**Source:** International IDEA.  
**Key:** no.=number of elections, FH= Freedom House rating of political rights and civil liberties. "2" indicates the highest possible level of rights and freedoms and 14 the lowest.

**Figure 16: Literacy and Turnout**  
Vote to registration ratio by literacy rate (1997), most recent parliamentary elections



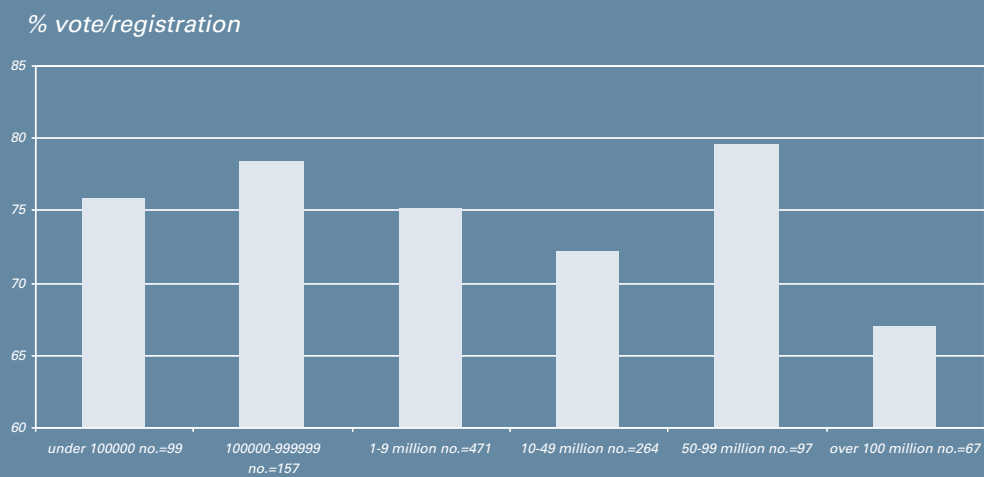
**Source:** International IDEA and Human Development Report (1997).  
**Key:** no.=number of elections.

**Figure 17: Vote to registration ratio by GDP per capita, most recent parliamentary elections**



Source: International IDEA and Human Development Report (1999).

**Figure 18: Vote to registration ratio by population size, parliamentary elections, 1945-2001**



Key: no.=number of elections.

# Voter Turnout Rates from a Comparative Perspective

While the capacity to read and write does not necessarily equate to an ability to make coherent and informed political decisions, turnout does increase with literacy, before declining in societies where literacy exceeds 90 percent. (See Figure 16)

Similarly, if we measure the wealth of a country against its gross domestic product and examine voter turnout performance a similar effect is seen, although it stays relatively static at the highest levels. (See Figure 17)

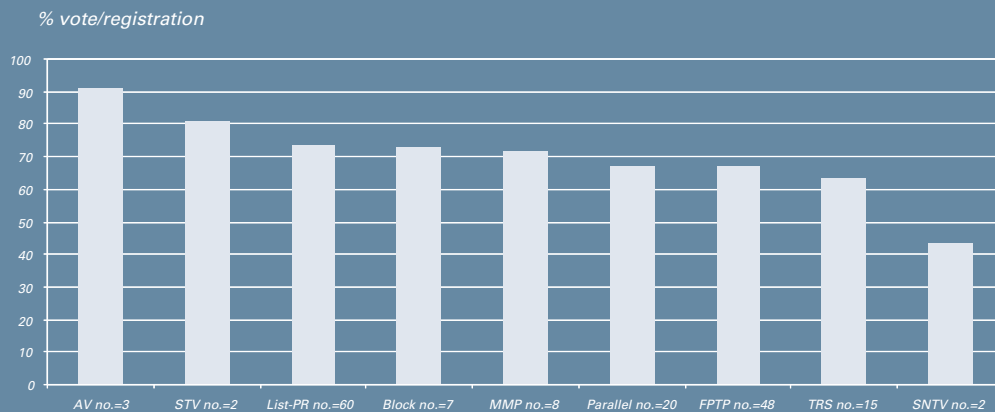
If we examine population size and voter turnout a clear correlation with regional results can be seen. Many African countries, whose low turnout is discussed above, fall into the 10-49 million group. In the over 100 million group, twenty seven elections are US congressional elections, with consistently low levels of turnout. (See Figure 18)

## ELECTORAL SYSTEMS AND TURNOUT

Within parliamentary elections, there are nine major electoral systems in use around the world, as categorized in the International IDEA Handbook of Electoral System Design

Alternative Vote (used in the three Oceania countries of Australia, Fiji and Nauru) leads with an average turnout of 91 percent, while the two countries with Single Non-Transferable Vote (Jordan and Vanuatu) have an average of only 43 percent. The other systems do not have such a large deviation, with Single Transferable Vote at 80 percent and Two-Round System at 63 percent. An interesting result is the relatively small difference between the two most widely used systems, List Proportional Representation at 73 percent and First Past the Post at 67 percent.

**Figure 19: Electoral system & turnout**  
Vote to registration ratio by type of electoral systems, most recent parliamentary elections



Key: no. = number of countries

# Electoral Systems: The Nine Sub-families

## **ALTERNATIVE VOTE (AV)**

A preferential, plurality majority system used in single-member districts in which voters use numbers to mark their preferences on the ballot paper. A candidate who receives over 50 percent of first preferences is declared elected. If no candidate achieves an absolute majority of first preferences, votes are reallocated until one candidate has an absolute majority of votes cast.

## **BLOCK VOTE (BLOCK)**

A majority plurality system used in multi-member districts in which electors have as many votes as there are candidates to be elected. Voting can be either candidate-centred or party-centred. Counting is identical to a First Past the Post system, with the candidates with the highest vote totals winning the seat(s).

## **FIRST PAST THE POST (FPTP)**

The simplest form of plurality majority electoral system, using single-member districts, a categorical ballot and candidate-centred voting. The winning candidate is the one who gains more votes than any other candidate, but not necessarily a majority of votes.

## **LIST PROPORTIONAL REPRESENTATION (LIST PR)**

In its simplest form List PR involves each party presenting a list of candidates to the electorate. Voters vote for a party, and parties receive seats in proportion to their overall share of the national vote. Winning candidates are taken from the lists.

## **MIXED MEMBER PROPORTIONAL (MMP)**

Systems in which a proportion of the parliament (usually half) is elected from plurality majority districts, while the remaining members are chosen from PR lists. Under MMP the PR seats compensate for any disproportionality produced by the district seat result.

## **PARALLEL SYSTEM (PARALLEL)**

A Proportional Representation system used in conjunction with a plurality majority system but where, unlike MMP, the PR seats do not compensate for any disproportions arising from elections to the plurality majority seats.

## **SINGLE NON-TRANSFERABLE VOTE (SNTV)**

A Semi-Proportional system which combines multi-member constituencies with a First Past the Post method of vote counting, and in which electors have only one vote.

## **SINGLE TRANSFERABLE VOTE (STV)**

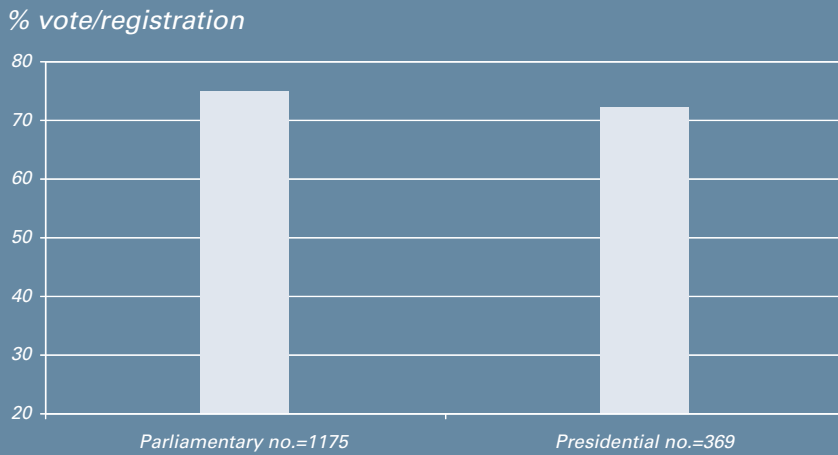
A preferential Proportional Representation system used in multi-member districts. To gain election, candidates must surpass a specified quota of first-preference votes. Voters' preferences are reallocated to other continuing candidates if a candidate is excluded or if an elected candidate has a surplus.

## **TWO-ROUND SYSTEM (TRS)**

A plurality majority system in which a second election is held if no candidate achieves an absolute majority of votes in the first election.

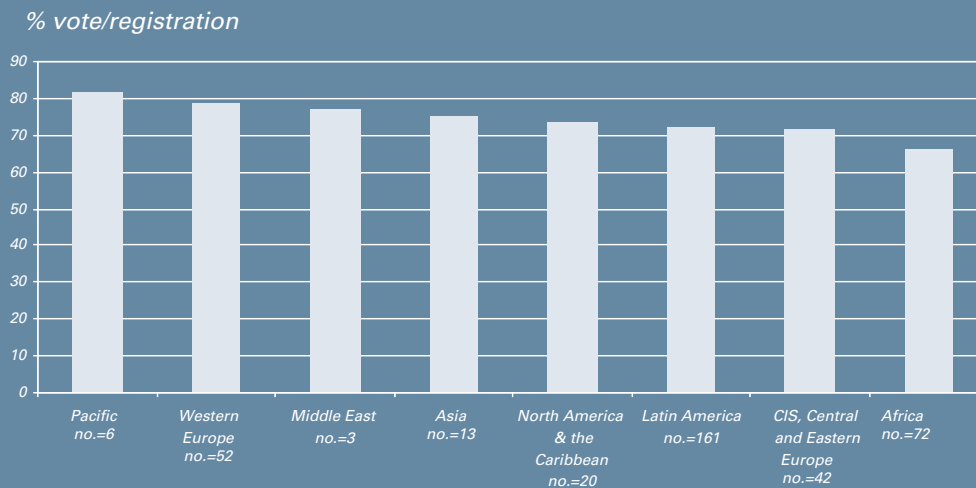
# Voter Turnout Rates from a Comparative Perspective

**Figure 20: Differences between parliamentary and presidential elections**  
Vote to registration ratio by parliamentary and presidential elections, 1945-2001



Key: no=number of elections.

**Figure 21. Presidential elections by region**  
Vote to registration ratio by region, presidential elections 1945-2001



Key: no=number of elections.



### DIFFERENCE BETWEEN PARLIAMENTARY AND PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS

Participation at parliamentary elections is only marginally higher than at presidential elections, although it should be noted that the database contains more than three times as many parliamentary elections as presidential elections. The 1,175 parliamentary elections saw an average turnout of 75 percent.(see Figure 20)

Across regions, Oceania still has the lead in turnout from Western Europe, while Africa has the lowest turnout in both parliamentary and presidential elections.(see Figure 21)

# Choosing Politicians by Lottery: An Option for the Future?

For many people today, democracy (“rule of the people”) has become equal to elections -to a system of representation and political parties where ordinary citizens are only engaged in politics at election day once every four or five years. Recently, however, voter participation has decreased, new technologies have challenged the old system, and the established democracies have experienced what has been called a crisis of political parties. Elections as the only means by which people can select who is going to govern are no longer taken for granted. In many corners of the world, new ways to achieve rule of the people are being discussed. Why not use direct, Internet-based discussions? Or lottery? The ideas are not as unusual as they may seem.

There is nothing new about selecting politicians and civil servants by lot. In Classical Athens, lot was used to select most secular officials, from members of the Executive Council to port authorities. Some key positions were rotated daily to prevent people from abusing power. The arguments for the use of the lot are highly valid today. The lot was used to prevent the cementation of political elites and thus allow larger segments of the population to take an active

part in the governing of society; it guaranteed a balanced representation between the tribes and groups in society and it was believed to protect the equality of the citizens and allow them an opportunity to experience how to govern as well as be governed. The selection by lot also distributed the duty and responsibilities of running the state among all citizens.

The ideas from ancient Athens have, together with the development of new technologies, lead to a wave of experimentation with citizen juries and other forms of involving people in the governance of democratic countries. During the last two decades, programmes in Germany, Denmark, the United States and Britain, for example, have tried to find ways to gather more or less randomly chosen citizens to discuss political issues in an environment where they can get their questions answered and their opinions heard and respected.

The first of these projects is called “Policy Juries” at the Jefferson Center for New Democratic Processes. In this case a high-quality telephone survey is conducted to randomly selected individuals in a given community (a city, organization, county, state, nation, etc.). Survey respondents

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who show an interest in participating are entered into the jury pool, where they are coded for certain demographic information such as age, gender, geographic location, and so on. The final jury of about twenty-four citizens is then selected to reflect the general public. Over several days, the jurors are provided with information from expert witnesses regarding all sides of the issue (ranging from public health and the federal budget to US peacemaking in Central America), and the results of the jury are issued in a public forum.

In the German “planning cell” project, twenty-five people are selected at random through the official registration offices. Their task is to evaluate problems or solutions, preparing new laws or planning local projects. The jurors sit in small groups of five discussing the issues for a limited time before the membership in the groups is rotated at random. The idea is that the jurors should be faced with four new group members six times a day to be confronted with a variety of opinions and knowledge.

Another interesting project is the “citizen juries” of the Institute for Public Policy Research in the United Kingdom, a project

built on the idea from the U.S. Policy Juries, but with one important distinction; the results of the citizen jury are binding for the government or administration that ordered the jury. If it does not want to implement the results of the jury, it has to give a press conference to present its reasons for not doing so.



# Women's Power at the Ballot Box

Pippa Norris

The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1979 and subsequently signed by 165 nation states, emphasizes the importance of equal participation of women with men in public life. Yet two decades later women remain far from parity worldwide at the apex of power, as heads of state at prime ministerial and presidential levels, in the executive branch as ministers and as senior public officials, and within parliamentary assemblies (International IDEA 1998; UN 2000). But what is the situation today at the most fundamental level of citizenship: in terms of women's voting participation? Laws restricting women's rights to vote and to stand for election persist in a handful of Middle Eastern countries, including Kuwait, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Oman and the United Arab Emirates (UNDP, 2000). In newer democracies, such as Namibia and South Africa, most women have only recently acquired voting rights. In established democracies, however, women have had

the legal franchise for many decades; since the 1920s in most western countries.

### GENDER AND POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

The earliest studies of voting behaviour in Western Europe and North America established that gender, along with age, education and social class, was one of the standard demographic and social characteristics used to predict levels of civic engagement, political activism, and electoral turnout (Tingsten, 1937; Almond and Verba, 1963; Rokkan, 1970; Verba and Nie, 1972), although observers noted that these gender differences were narrowing even in the 1950s in advanced industrialized societies such as Sweden (Lipset, 1960). Based on a seven-nation comparative study of different dimensions of political participation, ranging from voter turnout to party membership, contact activity and community organizing, Verba, Nie and Kim (1978) concluded: "In all societies for which we have data, sex is related to political activity; men are more active than women." The study established that these gender differences persisted as significant, even after controlling for levels of education, institutional affiliations like trade union membership, and psychological involvement in politics. During the same era, women were also found to be less engaged in unconventional forms of participation, like strikes and protest movements (Barnes and Kaase, 1979).

In recent decades, however, the orthodox view that women are less active has been challenged. More recent studies have found that traditional gender differences in voting participation diminished in the 1980s and

1990s, or even reversed, in many advanced industrialized countries (Christy, 1987; DeVaus and McAllister, 1989; Verba, Schlozman and Brady, 1995; Conway et al. 1997). In the United States, for example, in every presidential election since 1980, the proportion of eligible female adults who voted has exceeded the proportion of eligible male adults who voted, and the same phenomenon is found in non-presidential mid-term elections since 1986 (CAWP, 2000). This pattern is clearly generational: in the 1998 election, for instance, among the youngest cohort, (the under-25's), 35 percent of women and 30 percent of men reported voting, while among the oldest generation (75 years and up) 59 percent of women but 68 percent of men reported voting. In addition, overall women outnumber men in the American electorate, so that the number of female voters has exceeded the number of men in every presidential election since 1964, a difference of some 7.2 million votes in 1996. Similar trends are evident in Britain, where the gender gap in turnout reversed in 1979 so that by the 1997 election an estimated 17.7 million women voted compared with around 15.8 million men. Long-term secular trends in social norms and in structural lifestyles seem to have contributed towards removing many factors that inhibited women's voting participation.

Nevertheless studies commonly suggest that women remain less involved in more demanding forms of civic engagement. For example, a national survey of political participation conducted in 1990 in the United States found that, compared with men, women are less likely to contribute to political campaigns, to work informally in the

community, to serve on a local governing board, to contact a government official or to be affiliated with a political organization (Schlozman, Burns and Verba, 1994). Political knowledge and interest in public affairs are important preconditions to the more active forms of engagement. Studies have found that American women continue to express less knowledge and interest in conventional politics, so that they are less likely to discuss politics, to follow events in the news, or to care deeply about the outcome of elections (Bennett and Bennett, 1989).

What explains gender differences in political participation? Patterns of voting turnout can be affected by the legal structure of opportunities, by the mobilizing role of organizations like parties and NGOs in civic society, and by the resources and motivation that people bring to political activity. The most popular socio-psychological explanations of why women have commonly been less engaged in the past have been based on theories of sex role socialization and the persistence of traditional attitudes towards women's and men's roles in the private and public sphere. Alternative structural approaches have emphasized the social and economic barriers facing women, such as the social isolation of full-time homemakers who are excluded from political networks based on occupational, trade union and professional associations. The movement of women into the paid labour force is one of the prime candidates for explaining changing patterns of civic engagement. Educational attainment is also thought likely to play a role, since education provides cognitive and civic skills necessary for information processing in the civic world.

### POST-WAR TRENDS IN OFFICIAL RATES OF VOTER TURNOUT

Therefore what does evidence about trends in voter turnout suggest about the pattern of gender differences in civic engagement and how this varies worldwide, and what explains any significant differences that are apparent? There are two main sources of cross-national evidence that can be analyzed here. First, official statistics breaking down voter turnout by gender can be examined in the eight democracies where trend data is available in the post-war period, namely in Barbados, Finland, Germany, Iceland, India, Malta, New Zealand, and Sweden. This limited range of countries is far from representative of the broader universe of established democracies but, nevertheless, it does contain both large and small nation states, as well as societies like Sweden and India at widely different levels of socio-economic development.

Figure 22 shows the gender gap in voting turnout, measured as the difference between the proportion of men and women officially recorded as voting in general elections in these societies. The size of the gender gap displays considerable variations among the nations under comparison although at the same time most countries show a secular rise in female participation rates during the post-war era. In two nations, Barbados and Sweden, the data suggests that more women than men have consistently turned out to cast their ballot. In most countries under comparison, however, in the 1950s and 1960s women participated less often than men, producing a modest gender gap in Germany, Finland and Iceland,

## Women's Power at the Ballot Box

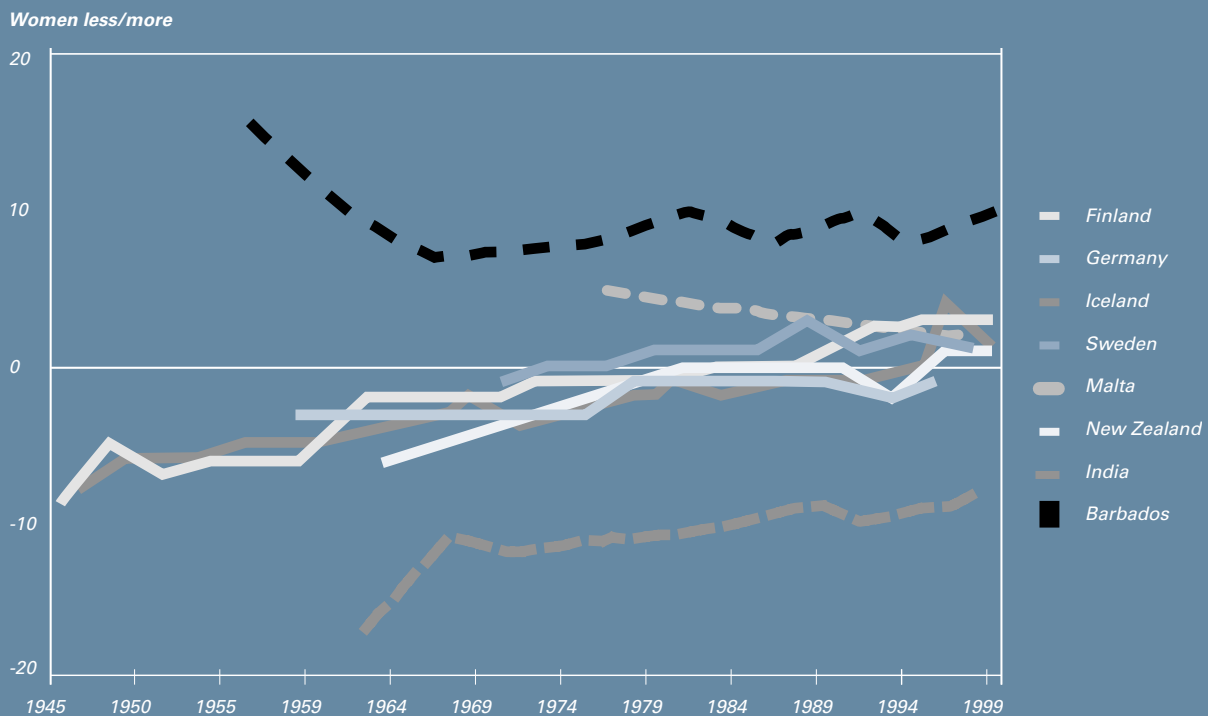
and a substantial gap evident in India. By the end of the time series, in the 1990s, the gender gap has closed or even reversed in all societies except India, where women continue to turnout at markedly lower rates than men, although even here the trend is towards a slight closure of the gap. While the official data cannot tell us the reasons for these trends, multiple explanations can be suggested for the closure of the gender gap in turnout, including generational shifts in lifestyles and social norms.

### SURVEY DATA ON REPORTED TURNOUT

In addition to examining official voter turnout statistics, to examine the picture more sys-

tematically we need to turn to survey data estimating reported levels of electoral participation. This study draws on the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems, based on national election surveys conducted in 19 countries from 1996 to 1999. The nations under comparison vary significantly along multiple dimensions, including levels of democratic and socio-economic development, as well as cultural and geographic regions of the world. The comparison includes four Anglo-American democracies (Australia, the United States, Britain, New Zealand), five West European nations ranging from the Scandinavian north to the far southern Mediterranean (Spain, Germany, the Netherlands, Norway, Israel), six post-

**Figure 22: The gender gap in voter turnout**



Source: Electoral turnout in official statistics.



**Figure 23: The proportion of men and women who reported not voting**

<i>Nation</i>	<i>Men</i>	<i>Women</i>	<i>Difference women/ men</i>	<i>Sig.</i>
Norway	15.7	12.2	-3.5	.021
Britain	17.5	17.1	-0.4	.779
Germany	7.3	7.2	-0.1	.919
Spain	10.3	10.5	+0.2	.909
Taiwan	8.3	8.6	+0.3	.860
Israel	16.9	16.5	+0.4	.868
New Zealand	5.0	5.5	+0.5	.438
Japan	15.8	16.8	+1.0	.611
Australia	3.6	5.5	+1.9	.048
Mexico	23.1	25.0	+1.9	.327
Czech Republic	9.3	11.6	+2.3	.192
Ukraine	21.9	24.2	+2.3	.354
USA	21.8	24.7	+2.9	.180
Netherlands	20.1	23.1	+3.0	.092
Poland	40.4	44.6	+4.2	.056
Hungary	23.9	28.7	+4.8	.035
Romania	7.6	15.6	+8.0	.000
ALL	13.7	15.5	+1.8	

**Turnout:** The question measured whether the respondent cast a ballot in the general election. Functionally equivalent but not identical items were used in each national election survey. The significance of the difference is measured by gamma.

**Source:** Comparative Study of Electoral Systems, 1996-1999.

communist nations in Central and Eastern Europe (Ukraine, Czech Republic, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Hungary), two Latin American societies (Mexico, Argentina), and two Asian countries (Japan, Taiwan). In comparing levels of turnout among women and men in different nations we need to control for intervening factors that can be expected to influence this process, including levels of democratization, as well as standard social background factors at individual level including age, education, occupational status and

income that previous studies have found to be commonly associated with levels of political participation.

Figure 23 shows the proportion of men and women who reported not voting in general elections in the mid-to late 1990s, the gender difference in turnout, and the significance of the gap. The evidence shows that women reported voting at significantly higher levels than men in only one nation (Norway), in thirteen nations there was no significant gender difference, and women

## Women's Power at the Ballot Box

**Figure 24 : The gender gap in turnout by social group**

	Men	Women	Gap	Sig.
<b>Age-group</b>				
Younger	27.5	27.1	0.4	0.64
Middle	14.9	16.1	-1.2	0.08
Older	13.1	16.8	-3.7	0.00
<b>Income</b>				
Lowest	19.9	23.1	-3.2	0.01
Low	18.9	20.9	-2.0	0.07
Moderate	17.7	18.7	-1.0	0.33
High	16.1	19.3	-3.2	0.01
Highest	17.8	17.9	-0.1	0.96
<b>Length of democracy</b>				
Established	12.5	13.1	-0.6	0.26
Newer	32.4	34.0	-1.6	0.05
<b>Urbanization</b>				
Rural	20.1	23.4	-3.3	0.00
Small town	20.5	22.8	-2.3	0.02
Suburbs	13.5	13.7	-0.2	0.76
Large city	17.7	19.3	-1.6	0.07
<b>Education</b>				
Incomplete primary	22.9	29.1	-6.2	0.01
Primary	22.7	25.3	-2.6	0.04
Secondary	20.6	20.6	0.0	0.98
Post-secondary trade	24.4	26.1	-1.7	0.18
Undergraduate incomplete	20.2	18.7	1.5	0.47
Graduate	14.1	15.8	-1.7	0.12
<b>Work Status</b>				
Employed FT	18.6	21.9	-3.3	0.02
Employed PT	16.2	13.9	2.3	0.07
Unemployed	32.5	35.5	-3.0	0.11
Student	28.3	25.3	3.0	0.05
Retired	15.1	18.9	-3.8	0.06
Homeworker		20.4		
Disabled	20.4	27.9	-7.5	0.07

**Note:** The gap represents the difference between men and women's reported turnout in general elections. The significance of the difference is measured by gamma.

**Source:** Comparative Study of Electoral Systems, 1996-1999

reported significantly lower levels of turnout in the remaining three newer democracies in Central and Eastern Europe (Poland, Hungary, Romania), by a margin of four to seven percentage points. Therefore this picture provides further confirmation of the pattern already observed in the official data; any tendency for women to vote less frequently than men in the past seems to have disappeared in established democracies, and this pattern only remains significant in some (but not all) of the post-communist societies.

If we turn to the breakdown of the difference between men's and women's reported turnout by social group, it is apparent that the gap is evident across most demographic categories. The age gap reverses: older women (over 65 years) are significantly less likely to turn out to vote than older men, a gap which shrinks to become insignificant among younger cohorts. What this suggests is that the process of generational change is behind the secular trends that we have already observed in the official statistics, so that as younger cohorts gradually replace older ones the residual gender gap in participation will disappear. The pattern by household income (as a proxy measure of socio-economic status) varies, with the strongest gap among the lowest quintile but also among the high category. The gap is not therefore simply reducible to inequalities between rich and poor. The gap is significant among newer democracies but not established ones, as observed earlier. Level of urbanization proves a weak predictor, although the gap is least significant among those living in the suburbs while it is most marked in rural areas. The education gap is sharp, especially for those who failed to

complete even primary education, and the gap shrinks with higher levels of education. Lastly, in terms of work status in the paid labour force, the pattern is somewhat mixed, with the gap sharpest among the disabled, the retired (reflecting the age profile already observed), and the unemployed, but also among those in full-time paid employment. Although it is difficult to compare against men, because of the small number of cases, the level of non-voting among female home-workers is not a particularly strong predictor of electoral participation compared with women in the paid labour force.

### CONCLUSIONS

The comparison based on the limited official data on voter turnout presented here suggests that many countries have seen a gradual shrinking of the disparities in participation between women and men during the post-war era. Countries like Sweden, Iceland, Malta and Germany have seen women's turnout gradually rise to achieve parity with or even slightly exceed that of men's, although the survey data indicates that some of the post-communist countries are lagging behind this trend. The breakdown in the CSES survey data suggests many of the factors underlying this phenomenon, especially the role of generational replacement that has closed the gap in most of the post-industrial societies under comparison. As the younger generation gradually becomes the majority, this promises to have important implications for women's influence at the ballot box.

# Women's Power at the Ballot Box

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**Note:** I am most grateful to the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES), based at the Center for Political Studies, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, Mich., for release of this dataset, particularly Phil Shively, and all the national collaborators who made this possible. More details of the research design are available at [www.umich.edu/~nes/cses](http://www.umich.edu/~nes/cses).

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# Voting for the Disabled

Turnout rates can differ greatly both between countries and over time. One of the factors that can influence an individual voter's decision regarding whether or not to vote is access to the polling station. Long queues in bad weather can prevent large numbers of voters - especially the elderly, the sick, or single parents that cannot leave their small children - from voting. Increasing accessibility of the polling station and facilitating absentee voting can address some of these problems and at least slightly increase the level of direct participation in the elections.

The disabled often experience physical obstacles hindering their right to vote. Since voting typically takes place in schools or offices, or even outdoors, the polling station

itself is often not suitable for those with impaired mobility, and resources are not always available to adjust to special needs. Ramps at stairs, increased space around the polling stands, low tables and voting tables located right at the entrance can often be sufficient to increase accessibility for voters in wheelchairs or other disabilities. Other measures can be taken to help other groups of disabled, such as having large symbols on ballot papers for those with bad eyesight or low literacy. All possible measures should be taken to enable voters to mark their ballot papers without assistance, thereby ensuring their right to secret voting.

Some countries have adopted special rules, extending the possibility of postal voting for disabled persons, and new technologies have now led to Internet voting as a possible option where resources are available. There are international and domestic NGOs advocating facilitation of the vote by the disabled.



# Compulsory Voting

Maria Gratschew

## CONCEPTUALISING COMPULSORY VOTING

All democratic governments consider participating in national elections a right of citizenship and a citizen's civic responsibility. Some consider that participation in elections is also a citizen's duty. In some countries, where voting is considered a duty, voting at elections has been made compulsory and has been regulated in the national constitutions or electoral laws. Some countries impose sanctions on non-voters.

Compulsory voting is not a new concept. Belgium (1892), Argentina (1914) and Australia (1924) were among the first countries to introduce compulsory voting laws. Countries such as Venezuela and the Netherlands practised compulsory voting at one time but have since abolished it.

Advocates of compulsory voting argue that decisions made by democratically elected governments are more legitimate when higher proportions of the population participate. They argue further that voting, voluntarily or otherwise, has an educative effect upon the citizens. Political parties can save money as a result of compulsory voting, since they do not have to spend resources

convincing the electorate that it should turn out to vote. Lastly, if democracy is government by the people, presumably this includes all people, so that it is every citizen's responsibility to elect his or her representatives.

The leading argument against compulsory voting is that it is not consistent with the freedom associated with democracy. Voting is not an intrinsic obligation and the enforcement of such a law would be an infringement of the citizen's freedom associated with democratic elections. It may discourage the political education of the electorate because people forced to participate will react against the perceived source of oppression. Is a government really more legitimate if high voter turnout is achieved against the will of the voters? Many countries with limited financial resources may not be able to justify the expense of maintaining and enforcing compulsory voting laws. It has been proved that forcing the population to vote results in an increased number of invalid and blank votes compared to countries that have no compulsory voting laws.

Another consequence of compulsory voting is the possible high number of "random votes." Voters who are voting against their free will may check off a candidate at random, particularly the top candidate on the ballot paper. The voter does not care whom they vote for as long as the government is satisfied that they have fulfilled their civic duty. What effect does this immeasurable category of random votes have on the legitimacy of the democratically elected government?

A figure depicting the exact number of countries that practise compulsory voting is

quite arbitrary. The simple presence or absence of compulsory voting laws is in itself too simplistic. It is more constructive to analyse compulsory voting as a spectrum ranging from a symbolic, but basically impotent, law to a government that systematically follows up each non-voting citizen and implements sanctions against them.

This spectrum implies that some countries formally have compulsory voting laws but do not, and have no intention to, enforce them. There are a variety of reasons for this.

Not all laws are created to be enforced. Some laws are created merely to state the government's position regarding what the citizen's responsibility should be. Compulsory voting laws that do not include sanctions may fall into this category. Although a government may not enforce compulsory voting laws or even have formal sanctions in law for failure to vote, the law may have some effect upon the citizens. For example, in Austria voting is compulsory in only two regions, with sanctions being weakly enforced. However, these regions have a higher turnout than the national average.

Other possible reasons for not enforcing the laws could be the complexity of the law or the resources required for enforcement. Countries with limited budgets may not place the enforcement of compulsory voting laws as a high priority; still they hope that the presence of the law will encourage citizens to participate. The cost of enforcement may lead some electoral administrations to lower their standards of enforcement.

Can a country be considered to practise compulsory voting if the compulsory voting laws are ignored and irrelevant to the voting



habits of the electorate? Is a country practising compulsory voting if there are no penalties for not voting? What if there are penalties for failing to vote but they are never or scarcely ever enforced? Or if the penalty is negligible?

Many countries offer loopholes, intentionally and otherwise, which allow non-voters to go unpunished. For example, in many countries it is required to vote only if you are a registered voter, but it is not compulsory

to register. People might then have incentives not to register. In many cases, like Australia, voters will face sanctions unless they can provide an excuse that is acceptable under the legal framework.

The diverse forms that compulsory voting has taken in different countries focus the attention not on whether compulsory voting is present or absent but rather on the degree and manner in which the government forces its citizens to participate.

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### LAWS, SANCTIONS, AND ENFORCEMENT

Figure 25 lists all the countries that have a law that provides for compulsory voting. The first column lists the name of the country, the second column lists the type of sanctions that the country imposes against non-voters, and the third column states to what extent the compulsory voting laws are enforced in practice. The numbers listed in the column for “type of sanction” stand for different types of sanctions, as follows:

**Explanation.** The non-voter has to provide a legitimate reason for his or her failure to vote to avoid further sanctions, if any exist.

**Fine.** The non-voter faces a fine. The amount varies by country: three Swiss francs in Switzerland, between 300 and 3,000 schillings in Austria, 200 pounds in Cyprus, 10 to 20 pesos in Argentina, 20 soles in Peru, and so on.

**Possible imprisonment.** The non-voter may face imprisonment as a sanction (we do not know of any such documented cases). This can also happen in countries such as Australia where a fine is common. In cases where the non-voter does not pay the fines after being reminded or after refusing several times, the courts may impose a prison sentence. This is, however, imprisonment for failure to pay the fine, not imprisonment for failure to vote.

**Infringements of civil rights or disenfranchisement.** In Belgium, for example, it is possible that the non-voter, after not voting in at least four elections within 15 years, will be disenfranchised. In Peru, the voter has to carry a stamped voting card for a number of months after the election as a proof of having voted. This stamp is required in order to obtain some services and goods from certain public offices. In Singapore the voter is removed from the voter register until he or

she reapplies to be included and submits a legitimate reason for not having voted. In Bolivia, the voter is given a card when he or she has voted as proof of participation. The voter cannot receive a salary from the bank if he or she cannot show proof of voting during three months after the election.

**Other.** In Belgium, for example, it might be difficult to get a job within the public sector. In Greece if you are a non-voter it may be difficult to obtain a new passport or driver's licence in. There are no formal sanctions in Mexico or Italy but there may be possible social sanctions or sanctions based on random choice. This is called the "innocuous sanction" in Italy, where it might for example be difficult to get a place in childcare for your child, but this is not formalized in any way.

The figure shows that not all countries that have compulsory voting laws provide for sanctions against non-voters or enforce these in practice. The actual presence and enforcement of sanctions varies dramatically between countries and regions. All regions except for North America and Central and Eastern Europe have countries with compulsory voting laws. Latin America, Western Europe, Asia and Oceania all have

countries where compulsory voting is strictly enforced in practice. The table shows that the most common sanction practised is the explanation sanction alone or together with a fine.

Less common is deprivation of civil rights or disenfranchisement, which is only possible in a small number of countries, as is imprisonment. Imprisonment has, as the sole sanction, never been imposed on a non-voter according to the sources.

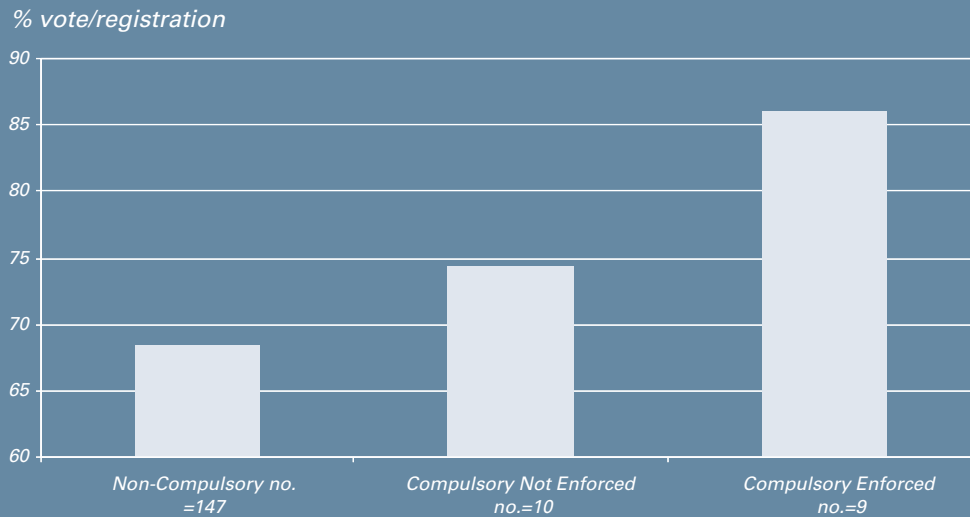
According to Figure 26, there is clearly a strong correlation between the level of enforcement of compulsory voting laws and voter turnout. The obvious theory supporting the positive relationship between compulsory voting and higher participation at elections is simple; each citizen's desire to avoid being punished for not voting increases the likelihood of them making the effort to vote. As shown in Figure 26, enforced compulsory voting increases turnout by a little more than 15 percent, compared with countries where voting is voluntary. However, compulsory voting is not the only factor to increase turnout in a country. Socio-economic, political and institutional factors have all been proposed as having an impact on voter turnout.

**Figure 25:** Compulsory voting and sanctions

<i>Country</i>	<i>Sanctions</i>	<i>Level of Enforcement</i>
<i>Argentina</i>	<i>1, 2, 4</i>	<i>Weak</i>
<i>Australia</i>	<i>1, 2</i>	<i>Strict</i>
<i>Austria (Tyrol)</i>	<i>1, 2</i>	<i>Weak</i>
<i>Austria (Vorarlberg)</i>	<i>2, 3</i>	<i>Weak</i>
<i>Belgium</i>	<i>1, 2, 4, 5</i>	<i>Strict</i>
<i>Bolivia</i>	<i>4</i>	<i>Not available</i>
<i>Brazil</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>Weak</i>
<i>Chile</i>	<i>1, 2, 3</i>	<i>Weak</i>
<i>Costa Rica</i>	<i>None</i>	<i>Not enforced</i>
<i>Cyprus</i>	<i>1, 2</i>	<i>Strict</i>
<i>Dominican Republic</i>	<i>None</i>	<i>Not enforced</i>
<i>Ecuador</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>Weak</i>
<i>Egypt</i>	<i>1, 2, 3</i>	<i>Not available</i>
<i>Fiji</i>	<i>1, 2, 3</i>	<i>Strict</i>
<i>Gabon</i>	<i>N/A</i>	<i>Not available</i>
<i>Greece</i>	<i>1, 5</i>	<i>Weak</i>
<i>Guatemala</i>	<i>None</i>	<i>Not enforced</i>
<i>Honduras</i>	<i>None</i>	<i>Not enforced</i>
<i>Italy</i>	<i>5</i>	<i>Not enforced</i>
<i>Liechtenstein</i>	<i>1, 2</i>	<i>Weak</i>
<i>Luxembourg</i>	<i>1, 2</i>	<i>Strict</i>
<i>Mexico</i>	<i>None / 5</i>	<i>Weak</i>
<i>Nauru</i>	<i>1, 2</i>	<i>Strict</i>
<i>Netherlands</i>	<i>-</i>	<i>Enforced until 1970</i>
<i>Paraguay</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>Not available</i>
<i>Peru</i>	<i>2, 4</i>	<i>Weak</i>
<i>Singapore</i>	<i>4</i>	<i>Strict</i>
<i>Switzerland (Schaffhausen)</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>Strict</i>
<i>Thailand</i>	<i>None</i>	<i>Not enforced</i>
<i>Turkey</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>Weak</i>
<i>Uruguay</i>	<i>2,4</i>	<i>Strict</i>
<i>Venezuela</i>	<i>-</i>	<i>In practise 1961-1999</i>

# Compulsory Voting

**Figure 26: Compulsory voting and turnout**  
Vote to registration ratio by level of enforcement,  
most recent parliamentary elections



Key: no=number of elections.

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# Youth Voter Turnout

Julie Ballington

This is a summary of several reports of on youth electoral behaviour which were commissioned and published by International IDEA. The degree to which citizens, particularly young people, participate in democracy has become an area of increased interest in recent years. Moreover, recent research seems to point to growing dissatisfaction and apathy among young people in new and old democracies alike.

In an effort to analyse turnout among young people, International IDEA published a study, *Youth Voter Participation: Involving Today's Young in Tomorrow's Democracy* (1999). Mostly based on survey data, the study attempts to document the scope of the problem internationally, investigating its causes and identifying potential strategies to increase youth participation. Included in the study is a comparative analysis of the participation rates of young people in 15 Western European democracies.

One classical finding of election research appears well documented in the sense that voter turnout is indeed lowest among young voters (18-29 years). The average for voters aged 60-96 was 93 percent (Eva Anduiza Perea, in International IDEA 1999b, 24). The

average turnout rate for all citizens across the 15 nations was 88.6 percent, and 80 percent for those aged 18-29. Further, in countries where overall voter participation is relatively low, the difference between youth turnout and the average turnout is greater than in countries with higher overall turnout rates. Unsurprisingly, where voting is compulsory, the turnout of young voters is substantially higher than in countries with voluntary voting. For example, in Switzerland (with voluntary voting in 25 out of 26 cantons), the average turnout is around 63 percent, while the 18-29 age cohort rate is over 13 percent lower. This is in contrast to Belgium (with compulsory voting) where the youth turnout rate was less than one percentage point lower than the average of 97 percent (*idem*).

Surveys from other countries confirm lower levels of electoral turnout among young people. In Britain, age has been found to be a key factor in explaining involvement in formal politics, with widespread non-participation and political withdrawal apparent among young people, especially in voter registration. Ahead of the election in Britain in 1997, young people were less likely to register to vote than other age-groups: 20 percent of 18 to 25-year-olds were not registered in 1995. Up to 40 percent of those aged 18-24 did not vote in the 1997 British elections (Fahmy, 1999). A similar trend was evident during the 2001 election, where the Market and Opinion Omnibus Survey (MORI surveys) found that 29 percent of 18 to 24-year-old non-voters did not register to vote.

The survey also estimates that turnout among 18-24 year olds fell to around 39 percent (Electoral Commission, 2001, 15).

Low levels of youth participation are apparent not only in developed democracies but also in emerging democracies, for example an analysis of South Africa's voters' roll revealed that registration for the 1999 election decreased noticeably with age. Those citizens 80 years or older demonstrated the highest rate of registration at 97 percent of potential voters, and the lowest was among first-time voters aged 18 to 20 where not even 50 percent of those eligible registered to vote. As with many other countries, participation rates in the June 1999 election were not disaggregated by age or gender. However, given the low rate of registration by eligible young people, it is likely that turnout among potential first-time voters was well below 50 percent.

However, it should not be concluded that age is the only variable that accounts for low voter turnout. Research has established that turnout is affected by a number of other factors, some relating to the individual micro-level (income, education, interest in politics) and others to the macro-level of the political system (the party system, the electoral system, election procedures). A multi-continental study commissioned by International IDEA (Lagos and Rose, 1999) attempted to assess the extent of young people's political involvement and how their outlook differed from that of older people. Their findings demonstrate that, while older people are more likely to vote than younger people, age

is only one variable (albeit important) that affects participation in the political process. Prosperity and education also show a positive correlation with democratic involvement. These conclusions are substantiated by research in other countries, for example the MORI Omnibus survey in Britain found that respondents who were unemployed or living on low incomes were less likely to be politically active than respondents with average or above-average incomes (Fahmy, 1999). The cumulative effects of age, class and income seemingly influence patterns of political participation.

Macro-level explanations, focusing on institutions and the political environment, go even further in accounting for low turnout among young people. The International IDEA study, *Youth Voter Participation* highlights a number of factors that may affect participation:

- the nature of the electoral system and whether all votes are seen to have equal weighting in the final result;
- the registration system, if automatic or compulsory, facilitates higher voter turnout;
- the frequency of elections is another factor, as “voter fatigue” increases with the number of elections;
- the competitiveness of elections and the number of parties contesting them may also influence voting patterns. Highly competitive contests tend to increase interest and turnout; and
- Countries with compulsory voting, like Australia, have higher levels of turnout

(International IDEA, 1999, 31 - 32).

In 1999, one hundred young people participated in the annual International IDEA Democracy Forum “*What’s So Great about Democracy? The Youth Speak Up!*”. Key discussions centred on the future of democracy and the challenges and opportunities that confront young people. Participants noted several factors affecting youth participation in politics, from “not understanding how the system works, to a growing distrust of political institutions and leaders, to a lack of time in today’s competitive environment”. They also emphasized that they are not apathetic about politics but rather that they feel alienated from traditional political processes and are not convinced their participation can make a difference.

Some participants said that they lacked confidence in the system and its leaders and felt that politicians only appeal to them during elections. “This gap between those who govern and those being governed seems to be getting wider and appears to be a fundamental reason for low participation.” Other reasons cited include lack of interest and disillusionment with the political and electoral system, doubts about the effectiveness of their votes, complaints about corruption in politics, and that they were not informed about where or how to vote (International IDEA 1999c, 8, 33). It is also possible that young people take time to develop an interest in politics, as they lack experience with political matters and are less socially and politically integrated.

While traditional party politics may be

unappealing to many, this is not to say that young people are not politically active. They are interested in specific issues, such as education, the environment and health care, and are consequently joining interest groups, non-governmental organizations or other associations that address their specific concerns. In turn, they are finding new ways to express themselves politically. However, in order to draw young people into the electoral process, different strategies may be considered:

- *Make it easier to register to vote:* In most countries, registration is a prerequisite for voting. It is therefore strategic to encourage young people to register, through public information campaigns, school visits, information displays, by placing registration facilities in places frequented by young people or by making registration available

over the Internet.

- *Facilitate easy voting:* By making voting procedures simple and accessible and by disseminating information widely, young people may be more encouraged to participate.
- *Lower the voting age:* Although considered somewhat controversial, this is one way to encourage the early politicisation of young people as participants in democracy. Minimum voting ages vary from 15 to 21 years, but 18 years is the most common worldwide.
- *Support preparatory exercises like mock elections:* This allows first-time voters to explore the practical workings of electoral procedures (International IDEA, 1999, 42-56).

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## Internet Voting

There has been much discussion on the use of Internet voting as a method for boosting turnout at elections and governments have shown an increasing willingness to experiment with the Internet.

However, there is relatively little experience that suggests that Internet voting would increase turnout to any significant extent. Very few government level elections have featured Internet voting, so comparisons are not easily made.

The 2000 report of the California Internet Voting Task Force predicts that Internet voting would increase turnout, especially among the young and busy professionals,

who have easy access to the Internet and whose turnout rates are low. On the other hand, Internet voting may only make voting easier for the already privileged and not increase access for marginalized groups. In the United States, for example, black and Latino households are much less likely to have access to the Internet than white households.

Much of the “hype” surrounding such elections comes from private companies and suppliers. Very few studies have examined the issue to determine if Internet voting can really increase access and therefore turnout.

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## Several-Day Polling

The most cost-effective and practical procedure is to hold elections in one day. By doing so, ballot papers and ballot boxes do not have to be stored overnight, alleviating security concerns, and the workload of election officials is reduced. Only about 10 percent of the democracies in the world practise several-day polling. One example is

India, the largest electorate in the world with 600 million voters, where elections are held on a staggered timetable across the country. There are countries, like Sierra Leone or Lesotho, where elections were held on one day but for logistical reasons polling time was extended in certain regions.

# Day of Election

There is an active debate, especially in older democracies on how to increase voter turnout. Some of the factors that may increase turnout would require complicated changes in electoral laws and even in constitutions, while others, like changing the day of election, would require little effort but could have a significant impact.

Of the 86 countries that Freedom House labelled as democratic in 1996, and that held election in one single day almost half of them had their latest election on Sunday. Saturday and Monday were the second most frequent election days. More recent figures also suggest that about half of the countries hold their elections on a non-business day.

A study in 2000 suggested that weekend voting increases turnout rates far above statistical relevance. One analysis found that

turnout figures would on average increase between five and six percentage points if Election Day for national elections changed from a weekday to a rest day. When it comes to elections for the European Parliament (which feature extremely low turnout in most EU countries), the same change could account for a nine percentage point increase.

If election day were moved from a weekday to a Saturday or a Sunday, religious groups that worship on these days might be offended, but there is another possible solution to follow the example of a vast number of countries, including South Africa, Germany, India, Chile, Samoa, Vanuatu and the Philippines, where the election day automatically becomes a holiday.